



## **RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA READING GUIDE**

### ***POSSE* by Kate Welshman**

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Reading Level: ages 15+ (contains some adult themes)

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## **SYNOPSIS**

***Kate Welshman's debut novel is a searingly honest portrayal of girls on the brink of womanhood, pushing the boundaries as far as they will go.***

Amy and her best friends – the Posse – are at year 11 camp and they're bored. In the scorching summer heat, sparks start to fly. Clare and Amy might be best friends, but they're sniping as if they're enemies. Camp leader Bevan is singling Amy out for attention, and Clare's jealous. Amy's feeling reckless enough to do something major . . .

In one night everything will change. Friendships will be tested and broken; careers will hang in the balance; and everything Amy knows about her friends and her family will be ripped away. What really happened when Clare disappeared that night? Who's telling the truth? And when things go too far, should you save your friends – or save yourself?

A bizarre home life is the background for the story that unfolds as Amy and her best friend become involved in a scandal with an instructor at a school camp. With themes ranging from the nature of adolescent friendships and the lies people tell to themselves and each other to the politics of sexual assault, *Posse* has a great deal of scope for classroom or reading group discussion. Although it pulls no punches with the issues it covers, *Posse* is always balanced and thoughtful, considering all the options and forcing readers to confront their own prejudices and perceptions as Amy makes choices that may change her life and the lives of others.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate was born in western Victoria in 1980. She has a little sister, Liz.

Kate was always good at telling stories and used to make up stories when she forgot to bring items to school for news. She also loved to read. It was her passion for horses that turned her into a bookworm. From the age of six she would read pony books until midnight with a torch. By the age of ten she was reading Stephen King.

Though Kate suspected that she was unemployable, she didn't know for sure until she finished her law degree and tried to get a job as a solicitor. When no firm would have her, not even on an unpaid basis, she had no choice but to try to employ herself as a barrister. She sat for the bar exams three days before her son was born.

As a barrister, Kate has found herself to be an outstanding employee. She does whatever her boss tells her.

Kate's difficulties finding employment really changed her views about the unemployed and homeless. She realised there wasn't all that much between her and the park bench.

Kate lives on a horse property in Sydney with her husband and three children. *Posse* is her first novel.

## THE WRITING PROCESS

Though aspects of the plot of *Posse* occurred to her as early as 2000, Kate didn't begin writing the manuscript in its current form until late 2005. She wrote the first three chapters during a spare few days in October 2005, refusing to write the entire story, or even turn her mind to it again, until she received some positive feedback from publishers. After three out of four publishers she sent the chapters to registered interest, she finished the book over three weeks during the summer holidays.

However, when she sent the finished product to the interested publishers, they all demanded a major re-write. Kate couldn't face this task and didn't look at the manuscript again until 2007, when she retained her agent Jacinta di Mase. With Jacinta's help, Kate re-wrote minor parts of *Posse*, and in 2008 secured a contract with Random House, which was not one of the original publishers.

Kate never 'plotted out' the novel. She started with a strong voice and a scenario and let the story develop.

## MOTIVATIONS FOR WRITING

Though she has always enjoyed writing fiction, it took some traumatic events to spur Kate into action. In 2005, the perjury, brainwashing and backstabbing she encountered in Family Court children's matters left her irate. When she asked herself the question,

'How do these poor kids turn out?', Amy was the answer. Writing Amy's story was quite therapeutic for Kate, even though the trauma caused by legal proceedings between parents ended up being only a minor theme.

Though Kate considered writing the book from an adult, rather than a young adult, perspective, she liked writing in the young adult voice – frank, energetic, honest and optimistic.

'Extraordinary things can happen in ordinary places. When I was drawing Amy's character, I wanted to be frank about what was happening behind closed doors,' Kate says. 'Everyone in Amy's family has something to hide, some habit, disease or penchant that they don't admit to. Amy is the only one with the strength of character to own up to the obvious and acknowledge her flaws with sass and wit. Her saving graces are her honesty and a fantastic sense of humour.'

## WRITING STYLE

*Posse* is written in the first-person present tense. The style is immediate, personal and conversational. Though intense in parts, the prose is generally relaxed. It's full of jokes, funny observations and anecdotes that describe the characters and the action without making the text drag.

Through writing in Amy's voice and letting us hear her thoughts, Welshman convincingly captures the ambivalence of teenage friendships – at once fiercely loyal and competitive; affectionate and annoyed. After the pivotal event of the story occurs, the first-person style allows us to see Amy thinking through her options: deciding whether to tell the truth or lie; whether to fit in or stand out; whether her experience constitutes a sexual assault; and to reconsider her own actions in light of her experiences.

## THEMES

- Rivalry and loyalty in adolescent friendships
- Child/parent and family relationships
- Hypocrisy, lies and the different kinds of dishonesty
- Student/teacher relationships
- Adolescent and adult sexuality, including gay/lesbian themes
- The politics of sexual assault
- Family estrangement and the effects of divorce
- Brainwashing as a form of child abuse
- The age of consent

## DISCUSSION POINTS

### Hypocrisy and different kinds of dishonesty

- *'Mum lies to herself and Dad lies to the rest of the world. I, on the other hand, am just too damn honest for my own good.'* (p. 6) Amy says this at the beginning of the book – has she changed her opinion on any of these statements by the end?
- *'You were right to tell the truth . . . And brave. It's usually the thing people least want to hear.'* (Deborah, p. 146) Do you agree? Was Amy right to tell the truth?
- *'Mrs Kerr did a head count of your hut last night just after lights out, and she remembers all of you being there . . . Mrs Kerr has told me that she paid special attention to your group, Amy.'* (Mrs Sproule, p. 173) Why does Mrs Kerr tell Mrs Sproule that she counted five girls when Clare was missing? Was she lying?
- Why does Jo lie to the teachers about what happened? What are the possible consequences of her lie?
- Why does Amy's mother tell so many lies about Amy's father? Does she believe what she is saying about him?
- *'I think I'm just an honest girl in a dishonest world. Better to be honest and the butt of the odd joke, if you ask me. It's much more fun than taking yourself so seriously that you have to cover up all the stupid mistakes you've made because they don't gel with the image you're trying to project to the world.'* (Amy, pp. 40–41)  
How important is image as a factor in why people lie? Do you agree with Amy when she says it's better to be honest and be the butt of jokes?
- *'She struts around having pleasant but superficial conversations with everyone . . . Like a politician, she makes a point of remembering your name and little details about your life . . . [But that's] the thing about her – she doesn't actually listen to anything you say. She's concentrating too hard on her own performance. Despite her ability to remember names and a few little facts, she doesn't pay any real attention to anyone.'* (Amy about Mrs Sproule, p. 155) Is Mrs Sproule genuinely friendly, or is she a hypocrite? How might others perceive her behaviour?

### Friendship and belonging to a group

- *'I actually hate the group system at school. You have to sit with the same girls at every recess and lunchtime or people think you're a traitor. You practically need a visa to move from group to group. And if you're not in a group, then you eat your lunch in the library, alone.'* (Amy, pp. 8–9) Is this your experience?

- *'We offend each other all the time, but no one's ever really offended. We've each got our little weaknesses that the others know about. We tease each other, but if anyone from outside the group criticises one of us, it's war. It's one of the few advantages of the group system, I suppose. We really close ranks.'* (Amy, p. 15) What are the advantages of being in a group? What are the disadvantages?
- *'She's an awful friend most of the time, if the truth be known . . . Like a rosebush that only flowers once a year. You put up with the thorns and black spot the rest of the time because the bloom, when it finally opens, is magnificent.'* (Amy talking about Clare, p. 61) Discuss Amy and Clare's friendship. Have you ever experienced a friendship that included jealousy or rivalry or arguments? Are you still friends? Is a friendship like Amy and Clare's worth maintaining?
- *'My instinct is to run squealing to the hut, back to the safety of my friends. But then I think of Clare prancing out of the mess hall, all willowy limbs and smart mouth, and it strikes me that I might be in a position to get back at her. If I could get something out of Bevan, something that embarrasses him or Clare or both of them, that'd put a spoke in her wheel. She's been asking for it all week.'* (Amy, pp. 98–99) Why do Amy and her best friend Clare fight over camp leader Bevan? Do either of them like him? How much does their rivalry contribute to the events the night Clare goes missing?
- Why does Jo betray her friends?

### **Power and authority**

- Do you have any sympathy for Mrs Sproule? Are her questioning tactics genuinely intended to get the truth out of Amy, or does she have her own agenda? How does her position affect her judgment?
- *'You stand out like a sore thumb, Amy Gillespie . . . I'm watching you and your cronies. Remember that.'* (Mrs Kerr, p. 31) Was Mrs Kerr right to be watching Amy? Why does she think that Amy 'stands out like a sore thumb', and is that enough reason to think she will cause trouble?
- Consider Bevan's actions as a camp leader *before* the incident that takes place in his hut. Was he acting in a responsible, adult way at the camp? What kind of example was he setting as a leader?
- What is your opinion of Amy's dad when you hear that he had an affair with a patient, and how does your opinion change after he tells the story on pages 237–238? Should a doctor in this situation be struck off the register? Did he abuse his position of authority as the woman's doctor or was the situation blown out of proportion?

## Identity, self-esteem and maturity

- *'It broke my jaw and I had to have an operation and get it all wired up. It was the worst thing that's ever happened to me. I'm back to normal now, but at the time I thought my life would never be the same.'* (Amy, p. 36) Amy's hockey accident in Year Eight has had a profound effect on her self-esteem. What effect does her second hockey accident at the camp have on her? Does it have any bearing on her actions later that night?
- *'But straight teeth are not going to make her beautiful. Someone should break this to her, but I'm not going to. I love her. It'd be water off a duck's back for someone like Clare. Beauty is a strange, brutal thing.'* (pp. 37–38) Discuss Amy's statement.
- *'I just have this feeling, like I used to have all the time when Mum and Dad were at each other's throats, that something dangerous is around the corner. Globus hystericus. Mum and Nanna get it too. It's like a tennis ball in your throat and butterflies in the stomach with the volume turned way up, sometimes until you can hardly breathe.'* (Amy, pp. 39–40) Do you ever get this feeling? Do different people react differently when they feel this way? How does Amy react?
- *'I'm too old for Marina. It's only a two-year age gap, but at school that means a lot. She's also underage. She's too young to be in this kind of relationship, and at fourteen, I would have been too. Perhaps I still am.'* (Amy, pp. 256–257) Is Amy mature enough to have sex? Is Marina? Is it only age that determines a person's maturity, or do other factors come into play?

## Family relationships

- In what ways does Amy's mother try to control her? Why does she act as she does?
- *'Since you were born, everything I've done – every decision I've made – has been with a view to improving your life. I've always done what I thought was good for you.'* (Amy's mother, p. 263) Consider what you know of Amy's mother. Is she telling the truth here – or at least, does she believe that it is true?
- Amy doesn't know that she had to ask to visit her father. Should she have fought harder to be allowed to see him? What were the reasons she didn't? Might the story have been different if Amy had had a better relationship with her father?

## Amy's choices

- Consider all the different advice and orders Amy is given after the events in Bevan's hut. For instance:
  - *'It's in your best interests to stop telling stories about Bevan Browning immediately. If you wish to proceed, I'll have your expulsion papers signed by lunchtime today . . . We don't tolerate girls who make false allegations as part of . . . well, it's no more than a game to you, is it? Entertainment. You don't care who you affect.'* (Mrs Sproule, pp. 176–177)
  - *'Amy, you have to sign a statement retracting what you've said. . . . keep Mrs Sproule happy. It'll mean you can stay at school.'* (Miss Howell, pp. 203–204)
  - *'Absolutely [you should] not [sign a statement]! . . . It'll be on your record forever. And it could be used against you later in life, if you become a lawyer or a politician.'* (Lizzie, p. 212)
  - *'I don't think you have to go as far as retracting everything in writing. But you'd have to reassure the headmistress that you're not going to take things any further. And, of course, you have to consider whether you want to take things further. You could probably get this guy charged, you know. If that's what you wanted. I mean, maybe you should. He could be off fiddling with some other girl as we speak.'* (Lizzie, pp. 224–225)
  - *'If you want to keep your life on track, you need to turn the volume way down. Just back away . . . I'm telling you to grow up and make a compromise.'* (Amy's dad, p. 239)
  - *'I think you should tell the truth . . . Until last night I thought this was all my fault. I thought that I'd be in trouble if the truth came out. But it's not my fault. And it's not your fault either, Amy. I mean, we were acting like idiots, but we're supposed to. We're sixteen years old. It's Bevan who's in the wrong. He's the one who caused all this, not you and me. There's no reason why he shouldn't take the blame.'* (Clare, pp. 249–250)
  - *'I would have taken you straight to the police.'* (Amy's mum, p. 259)
- Discuss Amy's choices. How does the advice she receives affect her, and how is her eventual decision affected by other people's actions? Does she make the right decision?
- What would the consequences have been if she had signed an untruthful statement retracting what she said about events?
- Would her decision have been different if Clare's parents hadn't already taken Clare to the police?
- Would her decision have been different if Clare had signed the statement she wrote, instead of ripping it up?

## The politics of sexual assault

- How does Amy contribute to what Bevan does to her? Why does Amy try to seduce Bevan if she's a lesbian? Does being sexually assaulted hurt Amy? Should Bevan get into trouble?
- *'Wait till the posse hears about this – possibly the juiciest event of my life so far.'* (Amy, p. 107) Discuss the implications of Amy telling her friends about her experience with Bevan. Would events have taken a different turn if she hadn't said anything? Contrast Amy's behaviour with Clare's when she refuses to say anything about what happened (p. 122).
- Revisit the scene on pages 81–87 after you finish the book. Now that you know what happens later, what do you think Bevan's intentions are in this scene? Does he genuinely want to help Amy, or does he have other motives for singling her out for his attention?